

Richard L. Wood Course Syllabus

Prepared for the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture by:

Richard L. Wood
Department of Sociology
University of New Mexico

The Center is pleased to share with you the syllabi for introductory courses in American religion that were developed in seminars led by Dr. Wade Clark Roof of the University of California, Santa Barbara. In all of the seminar discussions, it was apparent that context, or the particular teaching setting, was an altogether critical factor in envisioning how students should be introduced to a field of study. The justification of approach, included with each syllabus, is thus germane to how you use the syllabus.

I. Syllabus Justification

Senior-level course at the University of New Mexico, a large public university with very uneven prior training of students. Many have been accustomed to courses in which they are asked to reproduce lecture-taught material on multiple-choice exams. The best students are as sharp as good students at elite schools, but with less academic "polish"; the weaker students have been poorly educated through years of schooling in one of the poorest states in the U.S. I find that in order to engage students initially, I need to root my courses firmly in their experience. From this basis, I can challenge them to push beyond their experience and think both more broadly (about the wider world, others' experience, etc.) and more conceptually.

Albuquerque, New Mexico is a growing "sun belt" metropolitan area with some 500,000 residents. The student population largely reflects the diversity of the surrounding city: About half Anglo and more than a third Hispanic, with smaller populations of Native Americans, African Americans, and Southeast Asian immigrants. Along with this comes strong religious diversity: Christians, including adherents of traditional Hispanic popular Catholicism, liberal and traditionalist strands of Roman Catholicism, evangelical Christianity, and moderate, liberal, and historic black Protestantism; Native Americans engaged in traditional practices; Jews from all strands of Judaism; adherents of the "old new religions" such as Mormonism and Adventism; committed atheists, agnostics, and "seekers"; and both international immigrants committed to and recent converts exploring Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Confucian traditions.

Given this diversity, the course does not pretend to address directly all the specific religious traditions in which students may bring an interest. Rather, I emphasize two key themes: First, gaining insight into the intellectual tools offered by sociology for an appreciative and critical understanding of religious experience. Second, understanding religion within its social and historical context. By social context I mean contemporary American culture and society, and by historical context I mean the long-term structural transformation of human societies that has changed the role of religion in human life.

Lectures, readings, and class discussions seek to make these two emphases concrete by engaging students in thinking about society and their own lives in light of these theoretical tools. Class discussion largely reflects students' own religious interests, questions, and concerns, as well my own areas of expertise.

My teaching in the course combines two core assumptions: First, that the religious experience evoked through ritual and symbolism (rather than abstract belief) constitutes the core of religious dynamics (a la Durkheim). Second, that the "truth" or "untruth" of religious faith is simply a fairly uninteresting question to ask; the more interesting and engaging endeavor lies in exploring the dimension of the human condition given expression through religious language ("symbolic realism," a la Bellah).

II. Introductory Course Syllabus

Sociology 422: Sociology of Religion

Spring, 1998

Richard L. Wood

GENERAL COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course introduces you to the sociological study of religion. It does not assume that you either reject or embrace any particular religious faith, but only that you are interested in learning more about the role of religious experience in the lives of individuals, and about the role of religious institutions in society. Discussions and lectures in the class will respect the positions of both believers and non-believers.

After surveying the religious landscape in New Mexico, the U.S., and on college campuses generally, we will look first at the individual dimension of religious experience: In what ways do individuals experience a religious or spiritual dimension in their lives? What are the patterns to that experience in different faith traditions? How are those patterns different, and how are they similar? Second, we will consider in greater detail the communal or congregational dimension of religion: How do religious communities of various kinds give shape to the religious experience of individuals? How do religious rituals construct the "spiritual self" or "religious self" that encounters God, the gods, Yahweh, Satan, the Spirit, Buddha, Jesus, Allah, etc.? Third, we will consider the linguistic and symbolic dimensions of religion: Does it matter that we talk about and symbolize religious belief in various ways (for example, the various names of god listed above)? Fourth, we will look at the social dimension of religion: On one hand, how does religion serve to reinforce and legitimate the current social order of a given society (say, America in the 1990s)? On the other hand, how does religion serve to reform or revolutionize a society? Fifth and last, we will summarize the semester's look at the sociology of religion by integrating this material together theoretically: we will try to draw together an overall understanding of religious dynamics at all these levels, and how this fits into our global context at the dawn of the 21st century.

Given the variety of religious expressions in human life and the limited amount of reading possible in a short semester, we will by no means discuss all religious traditions. Rather, the focus will be on giving you intellectual tools that you can use to think about any religious tradition (or quasi-religious tradition such as mystical environmentalism, fanatic Marxism, or the human potential movement). During class, I will draw examples from a variety of religious expressions, chosen according to their relevance to the topic, my assessment of their interest to class members, and my own expertise (mostly contemporary Christianity, Judaism, and some minority religions and spiritual movements of the U.S. and Latin America; some broader knowledge of historic and global religious traditions). But class discussion by no means needs to be limited to areas of my expertise; I strongly encourage class participants to think about and bring to class discussion illustrative material from your own religious traditions and any questions you might have.

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND METHODS:

"I was concerned to take advantage of that climate [of transition and intellectual openness] to attempt to rid our education of its wordiness, its lack of faith in the student and his [or her] power to discuss, to work, to

create. Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in [humanity], on the belief that people not only can but should discuss the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion."

Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*

New York: Continuum, 1987 [1969] [bracketed revisions mine]

This quote from the Latin American educator Paulo Freire captures the spirit with which I aspire to teach this course. I suggest that how religious belief can best co-exist with modern pluralistic democracy is one of the "problems of democracy" we face; and that religious experience is a "reality" requiring creative discussion. In a course this size, this will be challenging and will require your active collaboration. This course will thus combine participative teaching methods with rigorous intellectual expectations: you will be expected to do all the readings, take notes regarding the content of those readings and your reactions to them, and come to class prepared to discuss them. Instead of just attending a lecture and taking exams, in the context of class discussions you will be asked to offer your opinions about the readings and course topics.

There is no single "textbook" for the course. In order to encourage critical thinking about the texts, diverse readings have been selected to force you to think material through yourself. Some readings are quite descriptive and engaging, others more analytical. I will suggest study questions to keep in mind as you read, but you should also ask your own questions as you go -- and bring to class those questions, partial answers, or comments that seem most important. You should do all readings prior to coming to class, so we can discuss them. But not all readings must be read with equal care: use this class as a chance to learn or strengthen a disciplined approach to reading, where you "skim" readings quickly initially to get the overall picture, then go back to read some sections more carefully and re-skim others.

Periodically, short films will also be shown to engage you on another level and as introduction to that week's topic. As with the books and articles, do not approach these films passively in order to "absorb" information. Instead, approach each film critically and actively: What does it show us about the role of religion in human life? What biases or blind spots does it have, or encourage us to have?

EXPECTATIONS AND GRADING:

Four components will determine your grade for this course:

1. Reading preparation (100 points): For each week's reading, you must write a typewritten, one page reaction paper comprised of two parts: First (about 2/3 of a page), a short summary of that week's reading: its key concepts, main themes, and conclusions. Second (about 1/3 page), a short paragraph recording your reaction to the reading: what you find plausible, what was unconvincing, what you thought about it overall.

These reading preps will be highly useful for studying before exams. You should do one for every week's readings. Ten times during the semester, I will ask you to hand these in for grading, each worth ten points. Only the first one will be announced: it is due Tuesday of the second week of class. The others will be unannounced, collected on nine other Tuesdays during the semester. If you do not have them when collected, you can hand them in no later than the next class session for a maximum of half credit.

2&3. Two short papers, due on Tuesdays of the tenth and fourteenth weeks of class (150 points each). To facilitate grading, these can be a maximum of 8 pages; they must be typed and double spaced, with a font of either 10 or 12 characters per inch (any standard font will fit this). Your understanding of course

materials, how insightfully you apply that material to religious experience and social life, spelling, grammar, and writing style all count.

Each paper will analyze a particular religious phenomenon using the sociological perspectives learned in this course. You will select what religious phenomena you analyze; the only requirement is that one be from a religious tradition in which you are already a participant or already interested in some way, and that the other be from a religious tradition with which you have had no previous contact and which is significantly different from the first. (Thus, a Catholic might write one paper on the Eucharist and one on the Santo Domingo Corn Dance; an evangelical might write one paper on an evangelical worship service and one on Zen Buddhist practices; an orthodox Jew might write one on sabbat services and one on a Russian Orthodox Mass; and a Blackfoot Indian might write one on a Sun Dance and one on a Quaker meeting). For each paper, you must attend the religious service of your choice as a "participant-observer": pay close attention (and take notes, if not too obtrusive) to the setting, the ritual actions, the words, gestures, and expressions of both the leaders, other participants, and congregation (if any). The paper will draw on the data you record at the service to analyze the religious system at work in this setting. More guidelines for these papers will be provided later.

4. Final exam (100 points). Multiple choice and short essay.

The "curve" will flex according to my assessment of the overall performance of the class, so helping others study or write papers will not risk lowering your own grade. Indeed, I strongly encourage this: understanding of any social phenomenon can be enhanced by drawing on others' perspectives. So help one another study, ask others for feedback on your papers, etc. — just be sure to write your own paper and do your own exam!

TEXTS:

- Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A voodoo priestess in Brooklyn*. (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)
- Davidman, Lynn. *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism*. (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991)
- Borg, Marcus J. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The historical Jesus and the heart of contemporary faith*. (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994)
- Course Reader. A selection of readings from various sources; see individual listings marked ** below for each week.

The first three books will be available at the UNM Bookstore and at several local textbook outlets, and on reserve at Zimmerman Library. The Course Reader will be available for purchase at a local copy shop.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

INTRODUCTION: SURVEYING THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

During this section, lectures and discussion will focus on the nature of religious competition and recruitment.

Week 1: Introduction to course

Religious belief on American campuses

For the personal use of teachers. Not for sale or redistribution.
©Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, 1999

**Selections from Commitment on Campus by Dean Hoge

**Recent data on religious belief: Gallup Polling, Inc.

Week 2: The American and New Mexican religious landscape

**Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, "The Fragmented Mainline," Chapter 3 in American Mainline Religion.

**Kathleen Egan Chamberlain, "Competition for the Native American Soul: The search for religious freedom in 20th century New Mexico" in Religion in Modern New Mexico, ed. by Ferenc Szasz and Richard W. Etulain.

**Stephen Fox, "Boomer Dharma: The evolution of alternative spiritual communities in modern New Mexico" in Religion in Modern New Mexico.

PART I: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

During these weeks, lectures will focus on the nature of religious experience (James, Bellah), conversion (Gelpi, Rambo), and how we can examine these phenomena social-scientifically.

Week 3: Individual religious experience and sociology

**Selections from Sharing the Journey by Robert Wuthnow.

Brown, K. McCarthy: Mama Lola: A voodoo priestess in Brooklyn, first half.

Week 4: Conversion and social psychology of religion

**Selections from Varieties of Religious Experience, by William James.

**Steven Tipton, "The Moral Logic of Alternative Religions" in Religion and America by Tipton and Douglass.

**Max Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions."

Week 5: Religious experience: familiar, exotic, unknown

K. McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola, second half.

**Chapters 4 and 5 on the Mormons in The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation by Harold Bloom.

PART II: COMMUNAL WORSHIP AND RITUAL: CORE OF RELIGION?

Lectures during this part of course will focus on how various forms of ritual "construct" religious experience, evoke different understandings of God, and elicit differing responses.

Week 6: Encountering the sacred

Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism*, first three chapters.

**Samuel G. Freedman, *Upon This Rock: Miracles of the Black Church*, Prologue and Chapter 5.

Week 7: Collective effervescence and the emotional core of ritual

Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism*, Chapters 4-5.

**Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, selections (Ch. 1, sec. 3-4; Ch. 7, sec. 2-5).

Week 8: Contrasting experiences of worship

Lynn Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women turn to Orthodox Judaism*, rest of book.

**Selections from *Congregation* by Jay Dorsey and *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake handling and redemption in Southern Appalachia* by Dennis Covington.

PART III: LANGUAGE AND SYMBOL: DOES IT MATTER WHO GOD IS?

Lectures during these weeks will draw on Geertz and Lindbeck to encourage students to think comparatively about religious language and symbolism; discussions will focus on the difference it makes how the central religious figure in a tradition is understood.

Week 9: Ritual, belief, worldview

**Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Preface and chapters 1 & 2.

Week 10: Symbolizing God

**Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, Worldview, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Chapters 3 & 4.

Week 11: Why do language and symbol matter?

Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Chapters 5 & 6.

**Selections from Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*.

**Selection on reinterpreting the appearance of the Virgin de Guadalupe by the Mexican American Cultural Center.

PART IV: RELIGION AND SOCIETY: FAITH AS OPIATE/FAITH AS LIBERATOR

Lecture and discussion during these weeks will focus on how and when religious commitment serves to reinforce patterns in society or as an agent of transformation in society (Walzer, Hill, Casanova, Maduro) and on the changing role of religion in American society (Wuthnow, Bloom, Bellah).

Week 12: Religious origins of reform, religious defense of the status quo

**Selections from Anna L. Peterson, *Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador's civil war*.

**Selections from Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*.

Week 13: Religious reform in American society

**Kenneth Wald, "Political Mobilization of Evangelical Protestants," Chapter 7 in *Religion and Politics in the United States*.

**Jose Casanova, "Catholicism in the United States," Chapter 7 in *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

Week 14: Religious institutions and social change:

**Robert N. Bellah, et al., "The Public Church," Chapter 9 in *The Good Society*.

**John Coleman and Richard L. Wood, "Discipleship and Citizenship in Community Organizing," Chapter 4 in *Public Discipleship*.

**Selections from Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community*.

PART V: SYNTHESIS: RELIGION IN THE (POST?)-MODERN WORLD

Week 15: Long-term prospects: social and religious

**Robert N. Bellah, "Religious Evolution," Chapter 2 in *Beyond Belief*.

Week 16: Final exam